

Miracle at Assisi

WORLD RELIGIONS PRAYING FOR PEACE



CNS photo

Pope John Paul greets religious leaders from all over the world at the Assisi multifaith prayer service, January 2002.

In 1986, when nuclear tensions were at a height, Pope John Paul II invited leaders of the world's religions to Assisi, Italy, to pray for world peace. This event is perhaps history's most important multifaith prayer service. It is also one of the largest gatherings of religious leaders in world history. The 1986 gathering triggered interfaith activity all over the world. Each year, on the feast of St. Francis, Catholics join with other faiths to pray for peace.

The Assisi event was repeated and surpassed on January 24, 2002, when Pope John Paul, in the shadow of September 11, invited more than 200 religious leaders to Assisi to pray for a world in crisis. The Pope was intent on demonstrating that religion needs to be an agent for peace and not a rationale for terrorism, violence and hatred.

The following reflection on Assisi 2002, authored by Fr. Damian MacPherson, is reprinted with the permission of The Catholic Register. Fr. Damian is director of ecumenical and interfaith affairs for the Archdiocese of Toronto. He is also a member of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, a religious order founded to promote ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation.



By Fr. Damian MacPherson, SA

The remarkable success of Assisi 2002 remains fresh in the memory of most who took note of that event. I think many—Roman Catholics especially—would agree that it is just downright difficult to anticipate what Pope John Paul's next historical initiative will be, given his known passion for Christian unity and his dedicated efforts to interfaith dialogue.

In view of his alphabet of historical firsts, one has to wonder if he has not left a wrinkle of concern in the brows of some in his College of Cardinals, as he places the footprints of the Roman Catholic Church on uncharted territory in the interreligious world.

I would like to suggest another first that possibly is being overlooked. I refer to Pope John Paul's exercise of a new form of leadership in his invitation to the world religious leaders to Assisi to pray for world peace.

The recent gathering of religious leaders was one of the largest and most representative gatherings ever assembled. Response to John Paul's invitation came from 16 churches and ecclesial communities, 30 Muslim clerics from 18 nations, 10 rabbis, and representatives from Buddhism, Tenrikyo, Shintoism, Jainism, Sikhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism and traditional African religions. In addition, from those religious leaders not represented, there was no known voice of dissent and thus one could only assume

agreement with the proceedings.

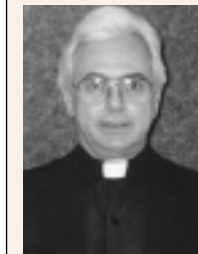
Without question, gathered there on January 24 in that small town of Assisi was the spoken voice of the world religions. It is not an experience likely to have a repetitious future. The unified response and enthusiastic presence of these representatives to the invitation of John Paul II can be seen as an exercise of a new form of leadership on the part of the Pope.

Clearly, he is respected as the first moral voice of authority in the world today, particularly on issues of international concern for world peace and justice.

Addressing the interreligious assembly in Assisi, the Holy Father spoke the minds of all those gathered when he affirmed that "whoever uses religion to foment violence contradicts religion's deepest and truest inspiration."

This new and perhaps unusual expression of leadership on the part of Pope John Paul was fully embraced by Rabbi Israel Singer, secretary of the World Jewish Congress. Rabbi Singer, departing from his prepared text addressed to the Holy Father and the assembled world religious representatives, stated more than

"WHOEVER USES RELIGION TO FOMENT VIOLENCE CONTRADICTS RELIGION'S DEEPEST AND TRUEST INSPIRATION." Pope John Paul II



An interfaith approach to world peace

For the past five years, as Assistant General of Scarborough Missions General Council, Fr. Ray O'Toole (inset) also served as coordinator of the Scarborough Missions Interfaith Desk. Fr. Ray would often speak to groups about interfaith dialogue.

A year ago, he addressed the Universal Peace Festival, an interfaith gathering at City Hall in Toronto. In his talk, Fr. Ray reflected on Pope John Paul's interfaith efforts. The Pope has invited all humanity to build a worldwide civilization of love, grounded in dialogue. Here is an excerpt from Fr. Ray's address:

"If all the religious traditions of the world would work together to combat the brokenness in our world, there would be a tremendous outpouring of goodness and love, an outpouring of compassion and mercy, of forgiveness and reconciliation, and an outpouring of justice, respect and dignity for all. The result would certainly be universal peace."



Organizers and speakers at St. Rose of Lima's interfaith service on January 24 in conjunction with the Pope's multi-faith prayer summit in Assisi.

L-R: Paul McKenna (Scarboro Missions), Irene Manahan (Christianity), Fr. Ray O'Toole (Scarboro Missions), Arliene Botnick (Judaism), Fr. Michel Dumont (pastor), Leslie Mezei (multifaith representative), Dr. Mirbaiz Khan (Islam), Amar Erry (Hinduism), Nancy Dinnigan-Prashad (Baha'i Faith).

Parishes join Pope John Paul in praying for peace

The January 2002 multifaith prayer summit in Assisi triggered interfaith activity around the world. In the Archdiocese of Toronto, six parishes sponsored interfaith services on January 24. Scarboro Missions collaborated with parishioners of St. Rose of Lima parish to organize one of these events.

At each service, members of five religions read a short passage from their sacred writings and then offered a reflection on the meaning of peace in their faith traditions.

Large crowds turned out, surprising organizers in the various parishes. One parish attracted 400 people. Another striking feature at each parish was the prayerfulness of the congregations. These interfaith gatherings were so successful that planning for 2003 has already begun. In next year's program, more parishes are expected to participate.∞

once, "only you (Pope John Paul) could make this happen." Few would question that Rabbi Singer was not at the same time echoing the full sentiments of all who had gathered.

This affirmation of Pope John Paul's leadership, from his elder brother in religion, could not have been more affirming for the world at large. Religion will be around for as long as civilization survives. Therefore, capturing the strength and meaning of the events of Assisi 2002 remains an enduring religious legacy.

While world religious leaders

were gathering in Assisi, interfaith communities around the world were also assembling. If the six multifaith celebrations in the Archdiocese of Toronto were representative of what happened elsewhere, it is clear that the laity, who responded far beyond expectation, feel the urgency to be connected around values that are common to our various beliefs.∞

"I WISH TO MAKE AN EARNEST CALL TO EVERYONE, CHRISTIANS AND THE FOLLOWERS OF OTHER RELIGIONS, THAT WE WORK TOGETHER TO BUILD A WORLD WITHOUT VIOLENCE, A WORLD THAT LOVES LIFE AND GROWS IN SOLIDARITY AND JUSTICE."

POPE JOHN PAUL II

ASSISI DECALOGUE FOR PEACE

During the interfaith prayer service at Assisi, ten of the 200 faith representatives each read one of the following ten commitments in their own language. In March, Pope John Paul sent a copy of the Decalogue for Peace to all heads of state. In an accompanying letter, the Pope stated that the participants at the Assisi gathering were inspired more than ever by one common conviction—humanity must choose between love and hatred.

1. We commit ourselves to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are opposed to all true religious spirit and we condemn all recourse to violence and war in the name of God or religion. We undertake to do everything possible to eradicate the causes of terrorism.
2. We commit ourselves to educate people about respect and mutual esteem in order to achieve peaceful coexistence and solidarity among members of different ethnic groups, cultures and religions.
3. We commit ourselves to promote the culture of dialogue so that understanding and trust may develop among individuals and peoples as these are the conditions of authentic peace.
4. We commit ourselves to defend the right of all human beings to lead a dignified life, in accordance with their cultural identity.
5. We commit ourselves to engage in dialogue with sincerity and patience, without considering what separates us as an insurmountable wall, on the contrary, recognizing that facing our differences can become an occasion for greater reciprocal understanding.
6. We commit ourselves to pardon each other's errors and prejudices of the past and present, and to support one another in the common struggle against egoism and abuses, hatred and violence, and in order to learn from the past that peace without justice is not true peace.
7. We commit ourselves to stand at the side of those who suffer poverty and abandonment, speaking out for those who have no voice and taking concrete action to overcome such situations, in the conviction that no one can be happy alone.
8. We commit ourselves to make our own the cry of those who do not surrender to violence and evil, and we wish to contribute with all our strength to give a real hope of justice and peace to the humanity of our time.
9. We commit ourselves to encourage all initiatives that promote friendship between peoples, in the conviction that, if a solid understanding between peoples is lacking, technological progress exposes the world to increasing dangers of destruction and death.
10. We commit ourselves to ask the leaders of nations to make every possible effort so as to build, at both national and international levels, a world of solidarity and peace founded on justice.